

**The New Ideal:  
Reshaping Schererville**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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#### Abstract:

Schererville, Indiana could be considered a suburb of Chicago due to its proximity to major highways leading there and the number of people who live there and commute to the city. But Schererville still has an identity of its own. Nicknamed "The Crossroads of America" Schererville owns the intersections of Highways 30 and 41, once the Lincoln Highway and the Dixie Highway, the first two highways in the United States. However, the problem with starting a town around two major highways is that they divide the city into quadrants, forbidding pedestrian traffic. Schererville was built for the car. The Lincoln Highway no longer runs through the old downtown of Schererville, which has allowed some historic places to be preserved. But the downtown has no life to it, despite the recent construction of a new police station and city hall.

My architecture studio design project includes the design of a recreation center in downtown Schererville, and suggestions for urban redesign of the rest of the town, with ideas from my experiences at home and from my participation in the Polyark World Tour. Careful planning could make the whole town more pedestrian-friendly. Pride exists in the town because of "The Crossroads of the Nation" claim, but it is one of the worst places to try to travel across. By celebrating the new bike path with the new recreation center and other destinations, Schererville can have a reason to be proud of its transportation again. The historic railroad lines will be celebrated by the location of the new recreation center, and a new gateway into the town will help dissolve the barrier of the massive highways. This project reflects the needs of the community, especially the young and old who are not able to drive far away from home. The new Schererville Recreation Center is a worthwhile destination for all.

#### Acknowledgments:



I would like to thank Rod Underwood for assisting me in the critique of my project and its final review.



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# The New Ideal

## Reshaping Schererville

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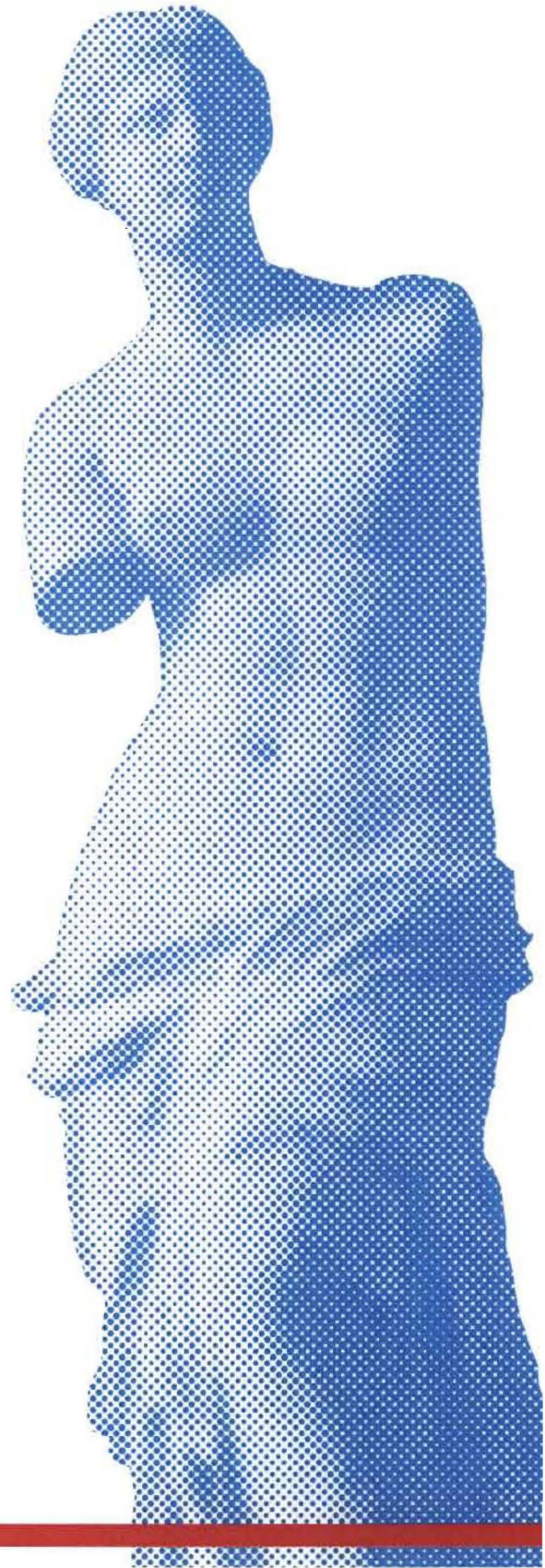
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### historical photos

These images are from the Schererville Historical society archive. These four photos depict Junction Ave. and the crossroads at 30 and 41 a hundred years ago.

The story of Schererville, Indiana begins and ends with a crossroads. At first, the area was a crossroads of Indian trails. Then it became a crossroads of railroads, and finally, a crossroads of America's very first highways. This story was carried by heroic men like Aaron Hart, Nicholas Scherer, and Carl G. Fisher. Few physical parts of this history remain, but it is a story that can continue into the future if the residents of Schererville will it to. Recently, little has been done to preserve Schererville's historic nature and the qualities that make it a unique town. But with a few well-planned projects, the story may be preserved.

A piece of Schererville's history already exists in places like the Scherwood Country Club, where an original log cabin was moved last summer so it could be properly preserved. This log cabin is a symbol of Schererville's place on the frontier; a place that was originally a swamped drained by Aaron Hart to make farmland, and named Hartsdale, a major stop on the railroad lines Hart allowed to cross his property. Nicholas Scherer was also drawn to this crossroads, and named his 40 acres "Schererville." But Schererville's ultimate claim as the Crossroads of America was realized when Carl G. Fisher developed the first highway and tribute the Abraham Lincoln, the Lincoln Highway, which ran right through Schererville. This was also the first road to connect the east and the west, and was greatly admired. So admired that the next year in 1914 Fisher helped plan the Dixie highway, which connected the northern and southern states and intersected the Lincoln Highway right at the center of Schererville. The 1.3 mile stretch of road connecting Schererville with the neighboring town, Dyer, was dubbed the "Ideal Section" because it became the model for all

highways in the country for its smooth paving, generous width, pedestrian paths, and lighting. Magazines called it “a vision of the future,” (Wikipedia.com/Lincoln Highway) but today, this stretch of road is no better than any other unglamorous piece of road in the country.

I learned much of this history by meeting with the Schererville Historical Society, a group of elderly locals committed to preserving important parts of the town’s history, but a group also severely affected by the suburbanization of the town. Dave at the Schererville Historical Society who teaches history classes at the one room schoolhouse gave me a detailed history of the land on which I grew up on. He told me how Aaron Hart was approached by railroad developers after he drained the swamps, and he made a deal with them allowing several tracks to be built through his town as long as his family could ride the train for free whenever they wanted. Hartsdale soon became a railroad hub. In 1866 Schererville came into existence since Nicholas Scherer had purchased 70 acres of land for his new village. Many other German Catholics followed him, and at that time 25 families lived there. Schererville grew over the years, and eventually absorbed Hartsdale. In Dave’s lifetime, Schererville has grown from 3,000 to almost 30,000. In 1913 the Lincoln Highway was paved, so Henry Ford’s Model Ts would have safe roads to ride on. This first stretch of road reaching into Schererville was became “The Ideal Section.” (Andrews)

“I had big plans for Schererville,” said Jim, another member of the Schererville Historical Society. He saw long ago that the majority of businesses and city buildings were dispersed all over town, creating the need to

make multiple trips a day by car. Jim is blind, and like many seniors in the area, cannot get anywhere except by walking. But there is nowhere to walk anymore; the post office and library moved out of downtown, and no places moved in to replace them. Jim’s plan was to move all the city offices and functions into one building at the intersection of the two highways, instead of spreading everything out. He also thinks the viaducts carrying the railroad tracks should be widened to accommodate pedestrians walking from the downtown area to where the majority of the businesses are located at the intersection of 30 and 41. He also wishes there were more attractions downtown, like a place to eat breakfast. (Stevens)

Jim said that people need more plans to walk to downtown, so I told the members of the Historical Society of my proposal for a new recreation center right across the street from the new town hall on Junction Avenue, a major road leading into downtown. They said that plans are already underway to build a senior center at the Scherwood Golf course adjacent to my site. The new bike trail happens to be running along the same stretch of road and is already under construction. I worked for the Parks and Recreation Department and I know how important recreation is to Schererville and its residents, made obvious by the major improvements made to its parks lately and the building of this new bike trail. However, Schererville has no indoor recreational facility in the entire town or surrounding area. When I worked as a camp counselor we had no place to take the children on rainy days. This multipurpose facility would provide services for all types of people, from children to seniors.



The new Recreation Center recognizes the history of Schererville and its emphasis on transportation because it will be built on the ground that was once the home of the Hartsdale train depot. The train is one of the reasons that Schererville became a crossroads, and now this site will be a crossroads of non-motorized transportation: a bicycle and pedestrian crossroads. On Rt. 30, the old Lincoln Highway, several plaques (fig. 1) recognize the history of the stretch of road and how this “Ideal Section” was the model for all the highways in America, but hardly anyone reads these plaques as they are flying past in their cars; I have only taken time to read them when I have been stuck in traffic. The marker at the new crossroads in downtown Schererville will be more than just a plaque. I propose a bike depot rental shoppe, not unlike the renovated train depot in Muncie that currently serves the Cardinal Greenway (fig 2). In the next few years, this bicycle depot will be very useful because a great greenway runs through Schererville, but few people use it because even if they do have bicycles, they have to drive their bikes to get to it. Many believe loading a bike up in a car to ride it on the path is too much of a hassle so they would rather rent a bike. Globally, this idea relates to places like the Netherlands, where tourists can rent bikes to ride around because so many people already bike in the crowded country. I imagine that someday soon, Schererville will also be so full of cars and traffic that biking will be a better option, and also a more affordable one. But unfortunately, automobile use is subsidized such that it is cheap to drive cars (Duany 95). It will take a lot to make people change their ways.



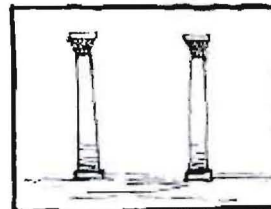
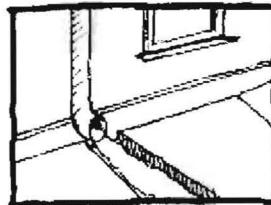
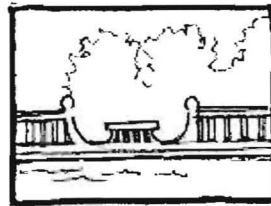
## precedents&results

figure 1: Plaque telling the history of the Lincoln Highway.

figure 2: The Muncie Indiana Depot, a good example of adaptive reuse.

This project began last summer as I prepared to embark on a semester long World Tour. The "Hometown Project" was a challenge to design an architectural solution for a problem in my community while drawing from influences and experiences around the world that would work into my project. While I found many organizational patterns in historic buildings and ideas about how to plan spaces in the earlier part of the trip (fig. 3) a moment that influenced me the most was an encounter in Amsterdam. I rented a bike for the day and rode all over the entire city, biking from park to park and enjoying a city that caters to bikes more than cars. As I rode around an enormous lake in a city park I noticed a building to my right; it was a modern building that did not fit in with the others around it (fig. 4). I could not understand the language enough to know what purpose it served but just the form of the building drew me in enough that I parked my bike and walked inside. I could not get past the

lobby because it was a theater and a performance was taking place, but I realized that this was how I wanted the recreation center to be experienced: a stop along a bike path, with easy access across a street to a vista that would draw people in to see what was inside.



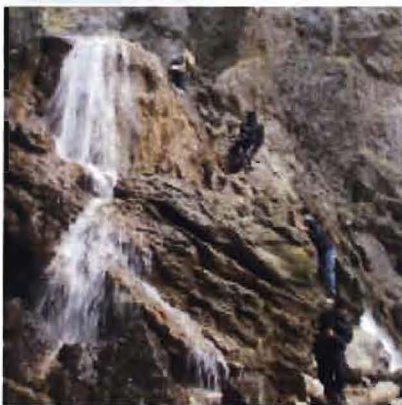
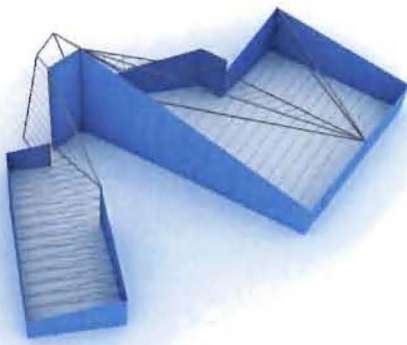
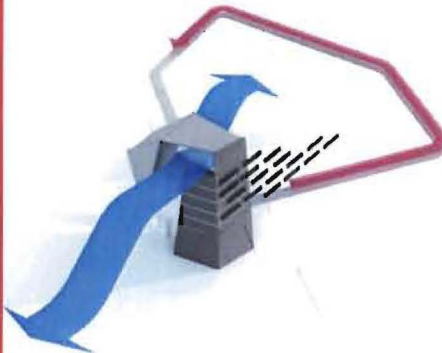
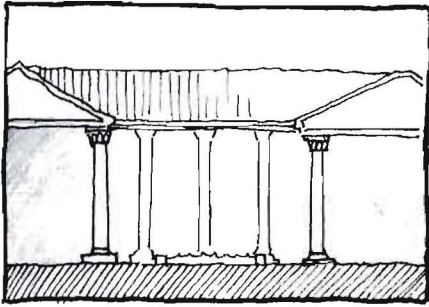
### look here

figure 3: Thumbnails showing ideas from World tour for seating, drainage and a gateway.

figure 4: Theater in Amsterdam.







experience this

figure 5: Diagram of peristyle housing.

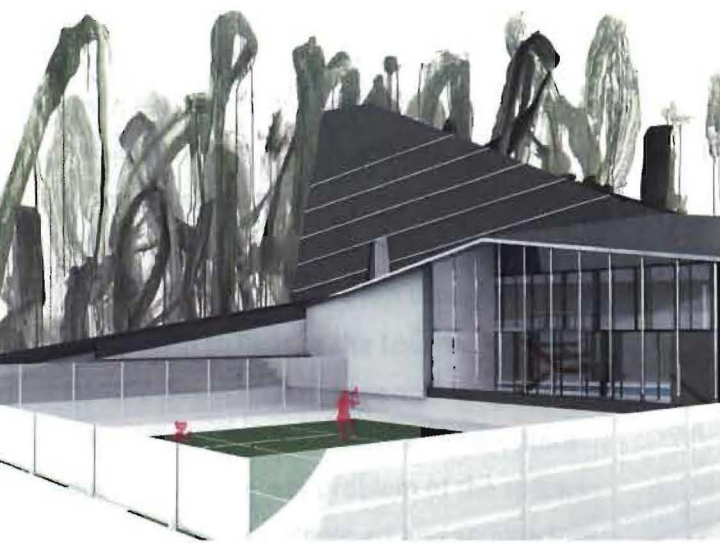
figure 6: Diagram showing main air circulation for the recreation center.

figure 7: Diagram showing the main beams and perkins, and vertical load bearing walls providing the structure of the building.

figure 8: Hikers in Malham

Many things happen inside the new recreation center. The site does not allow for a sprawling facility so the functions of the building are compacted and centered upon a courtyard, much like centralized peristyle housing in ancient civilizations (fig. 5). This centralized plan also allows for cooling of the building as these spaces can open up to the outside and courtyard, allowing breezes to flow through. A 400m running track encircles the courtyard, and circulates air to the main tower at the entrance to the building. An opening at the top of the tower pulls the air from the other spaces in the building, allowing passive cooling and air circulation (fig. 6). Inside this tower is a rock climbing wall, an exciting feature that draws people into the building and is visible from the running track. The folding, organic form of the building starts at the top of the rock wall and folds its way down, supported by trusses and load-bearing walls and columns (figure 7). The rock wall is influenced from my own climbing experiences in Malham, England (fig. 8). At the center of the courtyard is a recreational pool area, complete with a waterslide and surfing simulator for the children (fig. 9). Since this is one of the most exciting events taking place in the recreation center, it is visible from most areas, especially the south side of the building where most of the adult activities are taking place. The visibility into most spaces of the building allows people to live vicariously through others. In places that are not visible from all parts of the building, such as the tennis courts, stadium seating surrounds them allowing for gatherings to take place (fig. 10).





### supplemental images

figure 9: Tennis courts surrounded by stadium style seating on the south face of the building.

figure 10: Interior courtyard with recreational pool area and surfing simulator.

figure 11: View of recreation center and new bike path from downtown.

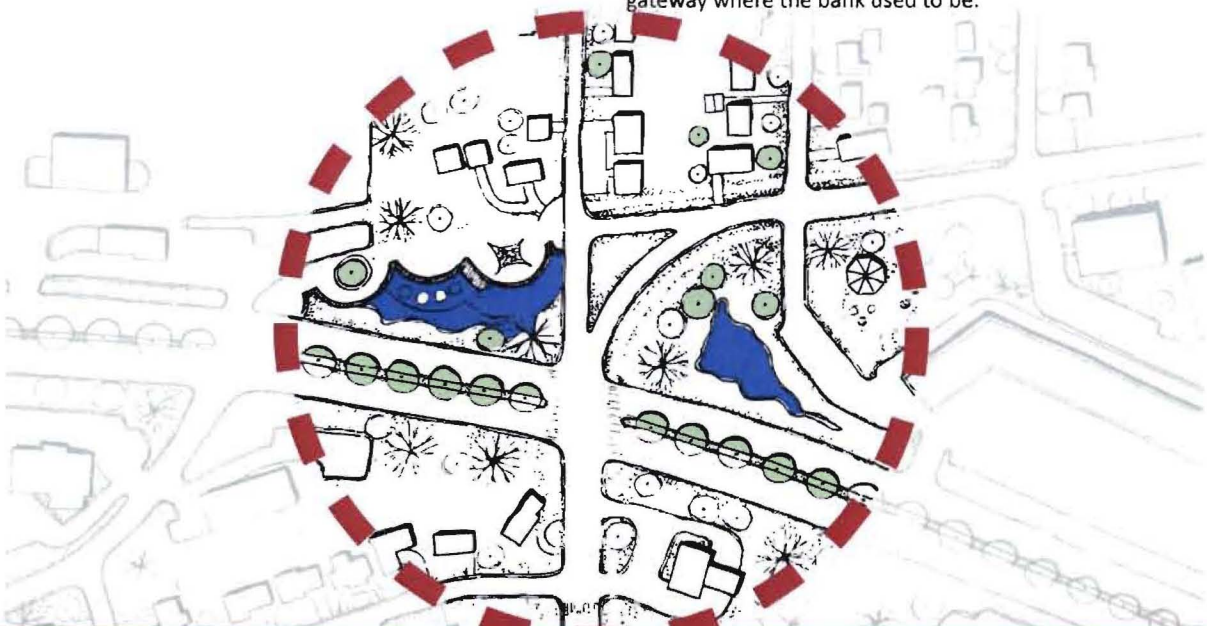


In Geoffrey and Susan Jellicoe's essay, *The Landscape of Man*, they stress the importance of a middle distance between two destinations (Jellicoe 80). Since the downtown area of my hometown is more than a mile away from the current city center, this link is especially crucial. In his book *Bicycle Diaries*, David Byrne discusses how it is impossible to bike across many American cities because highways bisect entire communities. He says "awe inspiring concrete ribbons...usually kill the neighborhoods they pass through, and often the ones they are supposed to connect as well. What remains of these severed communities is eventually replaced by shopping malls and big box stores..." (Byrne 8). I could not describe my hometown better; most of Schererville's problems stem from this kind of poor planning. In Nan Fairbrother's essay, *New Lives, New Landscapes*, he discusses the issue of planning and landscape. Most of Schererville's historical buildings have been destroyed. But I, like Nan Fairbrother, am not necessarily saying that preservation of everything from the past is the best idea (Fairbrother 83). Schererville's real problem is that it is heading down a road of

destruction. Because of the absence of planning the town is in complete chaos. Traffic is out of control and no strategy or town plan exists to organize new construction. The problem this project addresses is the disconnectedness of the community and its dependence on the automobile. My solution is the redevelopment of an intersection that will become a new gateway for the town (fig 13, 14). By tearing down a bank that currently blocks the old city grid, the grid will be reinstated, relieving some of the traffic problems by giving people other routes to their destinations, since adding more traffic lanes to the highways just makes traffic worse (Duany 88). The intersection will also funnel people into downtown from Rt. 30, and have a small park and eating area that services the local restaurants. People will also funnel down the new bike path through downtown and cross Junction Ave. to the building. The road will be narrowed and medians will allow pedestrians to safely cross and encourage traffic to slow down. This is all part of making the town safe for walkers.

### new intersection

figure 13: My proposal for the new gateway where the bank used to be.





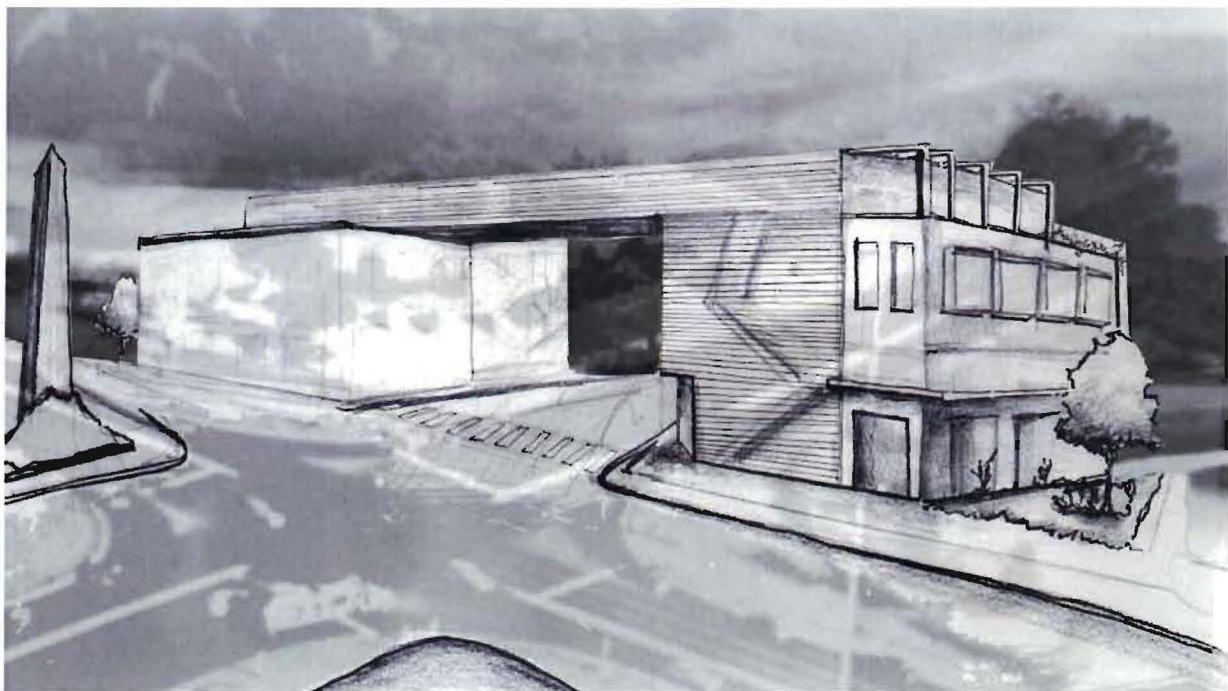
One last piece of the project is the redevelopment of the crossroads at 30 and 41. I am proposing mixed use buildings to house the businesses currently spread out along the highways (fig. 15). These buildings will create an identity at the Crossroads of the Nation that is not only pleasing to look at, but pedestrian accessible. Currently Schererville is a crossroads but has no worthy destinations. According to Suburban Nation, meaningful destinations are a prerequisite for street life (Duany 64). In Frederick Jackson Turner's essay The Frontier in American History he describes Indiana as a place of conflicting elements. He says most of the original settlement occurred towards the south which gave the state southern tendencies. But Northwest Indiana, today known as "The Region," is singled out for its northern qualities, and its proximity to Chicago make some consider it to be part of Illinois. Schererville has been mostly a bedroom community in the last century for people working in Chicago. The countless subdivisions provide cheap housing but the town has little to offer. But with careful

redevelopment Schererville could be a much better place to live. With multi-story mixed use buildings for stores and offices instead of spread out suburban buildings intended for a much smaller population, Schererville can start to evolve. These new mixed use buildings will be connected to the new recreation center with a path that symbolizes an important journey. This 1.3 mile stretch of pedestrian walkway will be "The New Ideal Section."

## visions

figure 14: A sketch of what the new town gateway might look like.

figure 15: An experimental sketch depicting the mixed use building bridging the gap at the crossroads.





The part of the project that may not work is that the community does not really see the problem with their lifestyle. Many people are proud of the town and are blind to its imperfections. They do not see how traffic has ruined the community and are reluctant to change. They are unwilling to put their money towards pedestrian paths when potholes in the roads need to be filled. The project could be successful if it helps the elderly living in the downtown area by giving them a place to walk to and exercise. It could help the children in the community because it gives them more to do than just sitting in their living rooms. It will give them a pool and slide, and a place to go play even on rainy days. While the middle aged generation may not use it much at first, it will become more essential when the automobile becomes less affordable and will give them a place that is much nicer for them to get in shape than chain fitness clubs. While the pedestrian paths proposed are easily accessible to most people in the town, I anticipate that many people would still use their cars to reach the shopping and recreation destinations. That is why the sites I chose were at some of the most used automobile crossroads in the town, I hoped they will be accessible to people using many kinds of transportation and a catalyst for change in the rest of the community.

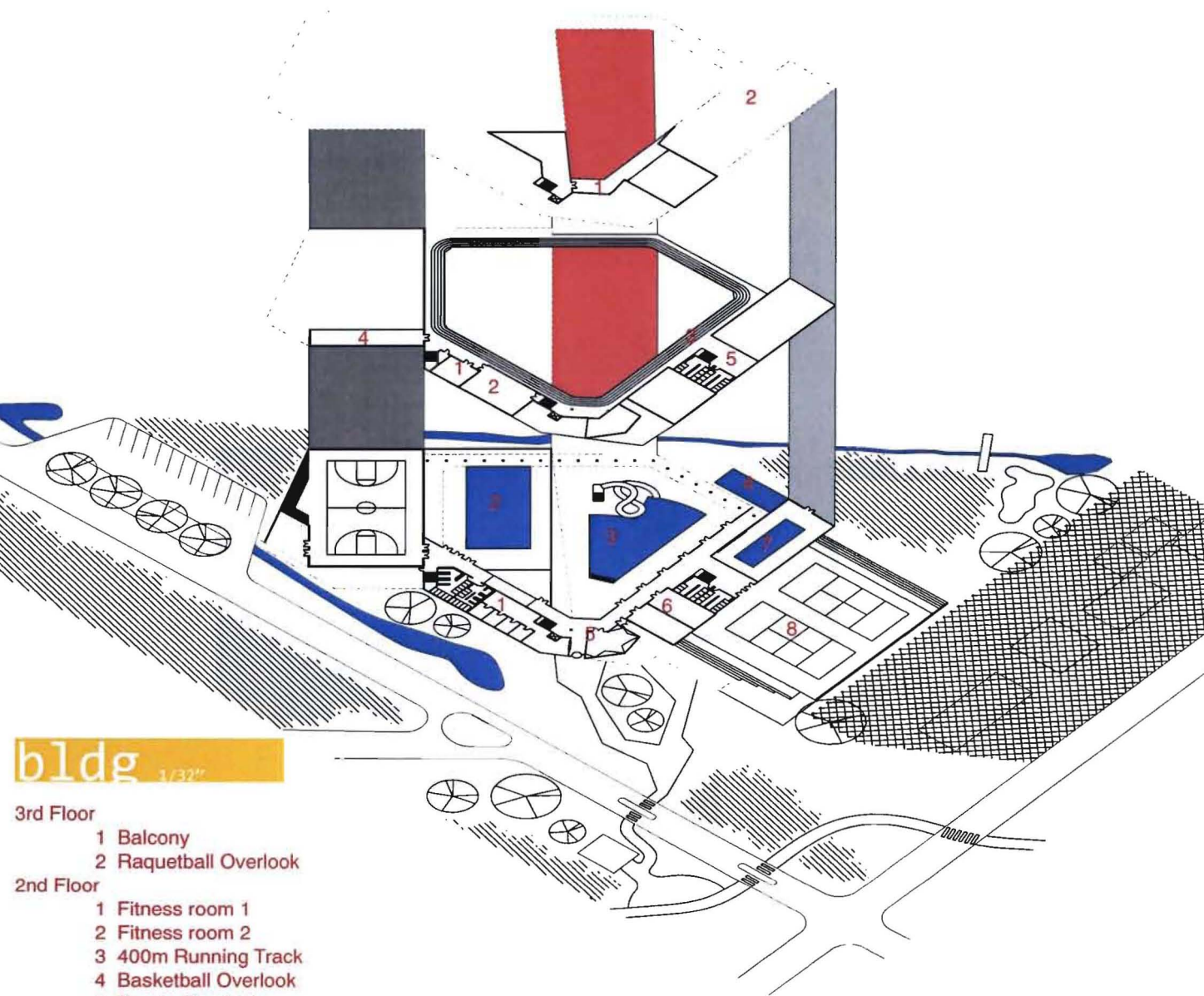
The project is environmentally sustainable because of its site choice. The site was already cleared of trees and wildlife and is adjacent to a ditch that provides drainage control. The size of the site for the recreation center turned out to be perfect for a geothermal system, and it provided temperatures suitable for a sports facility. Although not as many steel plants exist in

northwest Indiana as there used to be, all the steel for the buildings could be produced locally, and even some of the wood can be potentially harvested from local forests cleared to make room for subdivisions; bringing some good out of a bad situation. The will take advantage of the push for sustainable practices and energy use. Wind power is beginning to be used on local farms and this project became an example of how to be environmentally conscious in an area not so wide and open.

The project can further prove its sustainability through its continued use by the community. Every aspect of the project is something Schererville currently lacks, and even though the design has historical significance and will create a meaningful experience, the new recreation center will be successful because it is a necessity. While everything else in the town will change-- buildings are constantly being torn down and built up—this project can become a static symbol of what Schererville could be in the future if people started caring about planning and community connectedness. The permanence of these buildings, unlike the haphazardly built strip mall and fast food restaurants that take up most of the town, are a reminder of a worthwhile past, and hope for a worthwhile future. While most do not see the significance in architecture, the project can instill pride in some about living in Schererville.



more images



bldg

1/32"

3rd Floor

- 1 Balcony
- 2 Raquetball Overlook

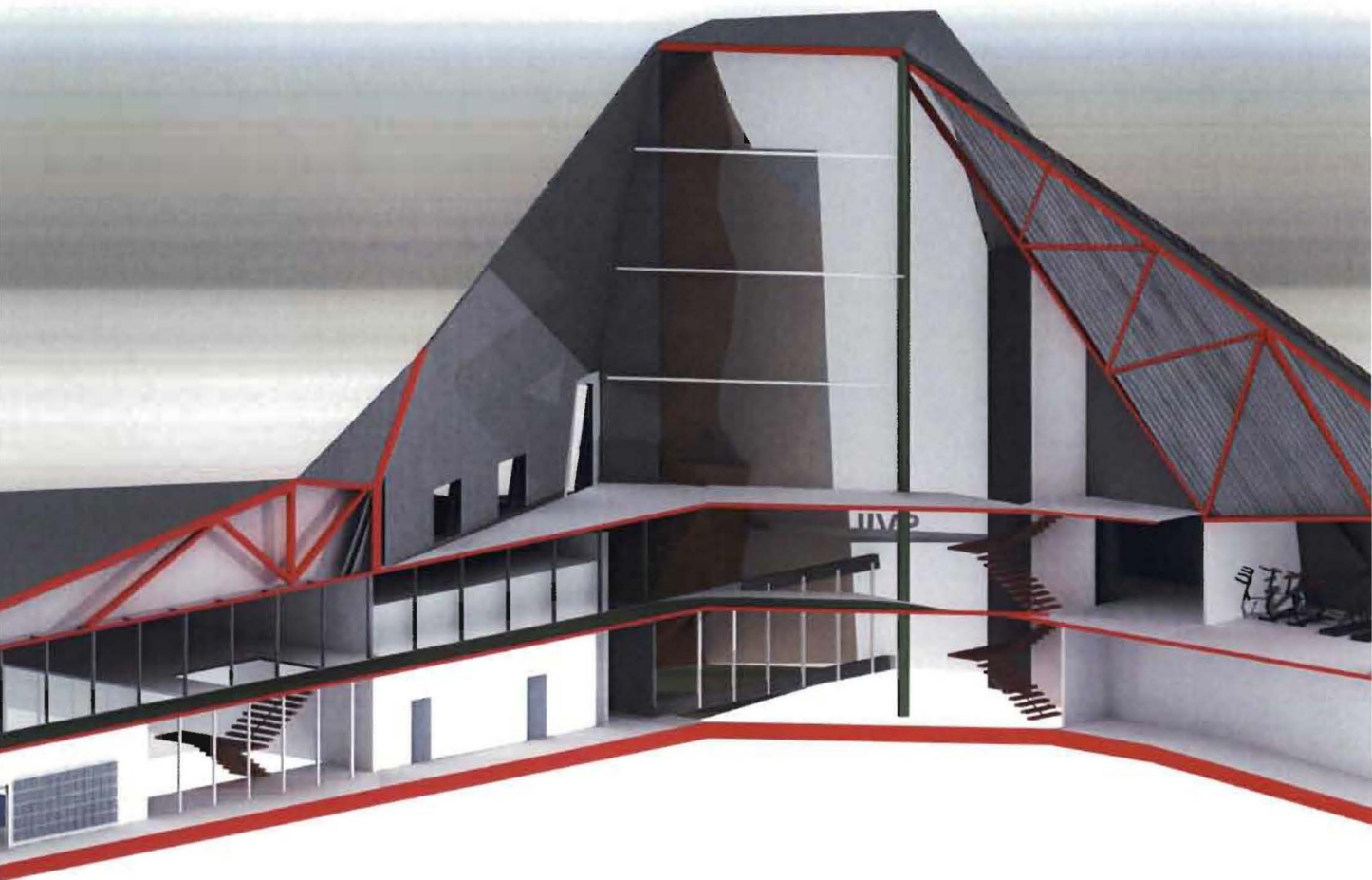
2nd Floor

- 1 Fitness room 1
- 2 Fitness room 2
- 3 400m Running Track
- 4 Basketball Overlook
- 5 Tennis Overlook

1st Floor

- 1 Administration
- 2 Junior Olympic Pool
- 3 Outdoor Water Play Area
- 4 Surfing Simulator
- 5 Rock Wall
- 6 Raquetball Courts
- 7 Lap Pool
- 8 Tennis Courts





## building section

figure 17: Cut through the building showing some interior spaces and relationships.





### Works cited

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